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*A COMMEMORATIVE ADDRESS*

BY

*GEORGE WILLIAM CURTIS.*



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THE  
LIFE, CHARACTER AND WRITINGS  
OF  
WILLIAM CULLEN BRYANT.



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*A COMMEMORATIVE ADDRESS*

DELIVERED BEFORE THE

NEW YORK HISTORICAL SOCIETY,

AT THE ACADEMY OF MUSIC, DECEMBER 30, 1878.

BY

GEORGE WILLIAM CURTIS.

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## WILLIAM CULLEN BRYANT.



THIS great and distinguished assembly is in itself an imposing tribute to the memory of an illustrious man. But even more impressive than this presence of genius and distinction, of character and intelligence, is the absence of one citizen—that venerable figure which had come to represent in this community all the civic graces and virtues, and from whose temperate lips on every occasion of literary and patriotic commemoration, of political emergency or of public appeal, we have been accustomed to hear the fitting words of counsel, of encouragement, of consolation. When Cooper died, the restless city paused to hear Bryant's words of praise and friendship. When Irving followed Cooper, all hearts turned to Bryant, and it was before this society and in this place that he told the story

of Irving's life. Now Bryant has followed Cooper and Irving, the last of that early triumvirate of American literature, not less renowned than the great triumvirate of American politics, and he whose life began before the century leaves behind but one of his early literary contemporaries. The venerable poet Dana, friend of Bryant's youth, at an age prolonged beyond fourscore and ten—

“An old age, serene and bright,  
And lovely as a Lapland night”—

the editor who published *Thanatopsis* sixty-one years ago, has seen its author join the innumerable caravan and lie down to pleasant dreams. But a thousand eloquent and reverent voices of the press and the pulpit, of the college and the club, of orator and poet, from the sea-coast to the prairies, have spoken for him who spoke for all. There was no eminent American upon whom the judgment of his countrymen would be more immediate and unanimous. The broad and simple outline of his character and career had become universally familiar like a mountain

or the sea, and in speaking of him I but repeat the thought of every American, and register a judgment already pronounced. A patriarch of our literature, and in a permanent sense the oldest of our poets, a scholar familiar with many languages and literatures, finely sensitive to the influence of nature, and familiar with trees and birds and flowers, he was especially fitted, it might be thought, for scholarly seclusion and the delights of the strict literary life. But he who melodiously marked the solitary way of the water-fowl through the rosy depth of the glowing heaven, and on the lonely New England hills,

“Rock-ribbed and ancient as the sun,”

saw in the river and valley, in forest and ocean, only the solemn decoration of man's tomb—the serious, musing country-boy felt also the magic of human sympathy, the impulse of his country, the political genius of his race, and the poet became distinctively an American and a public political leader. In the active American life of this century he bore his full part, never quailing, never doubt-

ing, giving and taking blows; stern often, reserved, unsparring, but panoplied ever in an armor which no fabled Homeric hero wore, beyond the art of Vulcan to forge or the dark waters of the Styx to charm, the impenetrable armor of moral principle. Time as it passed chastened the ardor of the partisan, without relaxing the vital interest of the citizen in public affairs. His lofty personality rose above the clamor of selfish ambition, and in his life he reconciled, both in fact and to the popular imagination, the seeming incompatibility of literary taste and accomplishment, and superiority with constant political activity. So rises the shining dome of Mont Blanc above the clustering forests and the roaring streams, and on its towering sides the growths of various climates and of different zones, in due order, meet and mingle. It is by no official title, by no mere literary fame, by no signal or single service or work; no marvelous Lear or Transfiguration, no stroke of state craft calling to political life a new world to redress the balance of the old, no resounding Austerlitz or triumphant Trafalgar, that Bryant is



commemorated. There may have been, in his long life-time, genius more affluent and creative, greater renown, abilities more commanding, careers more dazzling and romantic; but no man, no American, living or dead, has more truly and amply illustrated the scope and the fidelity of Republican citizenship.

Something of this is explained by the time and place of his birth, and the influences that moulded his childhood. At the close of the last century, his father, Peter Bryant, a physician, and the son of a physician, followed the family of his future wife from Bridgewater, in Massachusetts, westward across the Connecticut river, and up into the Hampshire hills to Cummington, where the first pioneer had built his cabin scarcely thirty years before, and there, in 1794, Bryant was born. Western Massachusetts is a high hill country, with secluded green valleys—a farming and grazing region, but every little stream turns a mill, and along the water-courses the air hums with the music of a various industry. The great hills are still largely covered with woods that shelter the solitary pastures and

upland farms ; woods beautiful in spring with the white laurel and azalea, ringing through the short summer with the song of the hermit thrush and the full-choired music of New England birds, and in autumn blazing with scarlet and gold of the changing leaf, until the cold splendor of the snowy winter closes the year.

All trace of the house in which Bryant was born is gone ; but the broad landscape that the boy saw remains, softened now by tillage and orchards, but a grave, solitary landscape still. The region was soon familiar to him. Not only its serious spirit touched his soul and left its inextinguishable impress upon his character—but he knew it in detail—its trees, its shrubs and plants, their history and uses—the habits and resorts of all its birds and beasts ; and this knowledge gave the man the accuracy of a naturalist. The very spirit of primitive New England brooded over the thinly peopled hills, and in the little villages and farms, and in the bare meeting-house and log school-house were cherished and perpetuated the Puritan traditions and character that

have made a great people. In the more secluded communities of that region the simple and robust virtues of a vanished century still linger, and we may see in them to-day what our fathers beheld, and, beholding, joyfully believed a republic possible—a republic of honest, equal, intelligent, self-respecting citizens, the republic of Franklin and of Adams, the republic of Lincoln and of Bryant. He was not born too late to see and feel among the people of the hills the spirit of the Revolution—to hear, by the blazing winter fire, tales which are now romantic legends, told by their own heroes, stories of Bennington and Bunker Hill, of Ticonderoga and Saratoga; and doubtless, also, he had himself seen some of the Hampshire recruits of Shay's rebellion, which sprang from the confusion and suffering that followed the Revolution. There were remoter and more terrible traditions; also, tales of the old French war, of Port Royal and Louisburg; legends of the beautiful valley of the Connecticut, which King Philip's war had wasted; cruel memories of Deerfield, and Hadley, and Turner's Falls, and of the

fatally luxuriant meadow where the flower of Essex lay bleeding.

Bryant has described the sports of his boyhood and the customs of the country-side. They are not all gone. The columns of smoke rising over the woods from the maple-sugar camp, in the chill air of March and early April, eighty years ago, still hang above them; and when, under the reddening trees of the last October, I went to the grave of his father in the lonely burial-ground on the hill, the farmer was piling upon the barn floor the long, rustling heaps of corn for the husking, as the boy Bryant saw them. His books were Sanford and Merton, and Miss Barbault, the Pilgrim's Progress and Robinson Crusoe, and Berquin's Stories and Watts's Hymns. But the father early trained his son in the books that he himself liked to read—Pope, and Gray, and Goldsmith—and his son soon began to echo their music. The boy wrote verses at ten which the happy father sent to the "Hampshire Gazette," at Northampton, a paper which had been established with true American instinct, in the midst of the excite-

ment of Shay's rebellion, to encourage loyalty to law. It was a fitting journal in which to print the earliest verses of the future editor who was always to defend law as the palladium of liberty.

To this secluded mountain village, and to the boy and his father, who had evidently a singular sympathy even at that age, the news of the great world came by the weekly post. There were then printed during the week, in all New England, only thirty thousand copies of newspapers, and among them there was but one daily paper. But the whole country glowed with political ardor. The River Gods, as the heads of leading families in the valley of the Connecticut were called, were uncompromising Federalists, and so were the social powers of the hills. The Federal Doctor Bryant trained his son in his own political views, and, doubtless, he thought to good purpose, when, before his fourteenth birthday, the son had written "The Embargo," a poem which reflected, in Pope's decasyllable, the universal Federal hatred of Thomas Jefferson. Percival, also, who was but ten months

younger than Bryant, displayed at the same age of thirteen the fervor of Connecticut Federalism in his "Commerciad," a poem of two thousand two hundred and sixty-eight lines, which probably nobody ever read through, in which he was as unsparing upon Mr. Jefferson as the young Bryant, but somewhat less smooth in versification :

"There Hillhouse, born our country's rights to guard,  
To keep our people from the statutes hard  
Of curséd Jefferson, son of the Devil,  
Whose thoughts are wicked, and whose mind is evil."

Such rhymes of boys are but songs of the mocking-bird; yet they show the intensity and bitterness of the political feeling amid which Bryant was trained, at a time which we sometimes fondly call the golden age of the Republic. But a time in which boys were taught to call Jefferson the Devil, and in which it was said of Washington that he was the source of all the misfortunes of the country, was a time whose frantic political vituperation pales the "uneffectual fire" of our own, and in whose mad extravagance we may well study the baseness of partisan ribaldry.

Bryant learned Latin and Greek readily, and he was sixteen years old when, in October, 1810, he joined the Sophomore Class at Williams College. One of his classmates, General Charles F. Sedgwick, still living in an honored age, describes the wiry and well-knit figure of the young poet, the beauty of his face, and his full flowing, dark brown hair when he came to the college. The reputation of his early verses and the rumor of his genius were like an aureole about the head of the modest young scholar; but he was never known to speak of his verses, nor did his companions allude to them. One day, however, to the delight of the class and of the tutor, he recited an original poem, and to a few friends he read a translation of an ode of Anacreon. During his brief college life Bryant was mild and gentlemanly, unobtrusive in his conduct, grave in conversation, diligent in study, associating naturally with the quiet and orderly students. But he was not contented. The boy had come down from the pure breezes of the hills into what seemed to him the closer and less healthful air of the

little village, not then as now one of the loveliest of the beautiful villages of New England, and at the end of his second term, the 1st of May, 1811, having been at college only seven months, he took an honorable dismissal. The College, however, subsequently granted him his degree, and restored his name to the catalogue. Before Bryant left, he read before a college society a short humorously sarcastic poem upon his alma mater, a boyish freak at which he always smiled. The harmless verse survives, I believe, only in the recollection of the Reverend Dr. Hallock, son of the Plainfield pastor who fitted Bryant for college. But Dr. Hallock, with delicate fidelity to the fame of his college and his friend, has locked it fast in his memory and jealously guards the key. Upon leaving Williams, Bryant had hoped to go with his chum to Yale College, but his father found that the cost would be too great, so the youth returned to his father's house and devoted himself for a year to the classics and mathematics.

This was the end of Bryant's schooling, and this was all the visible preparation for the



writing of the first enduring poem in American literature—the work, indeed, from which that literature distinctively dates—the poem which, in all the after, riper fruitage of the poet's genius, was never surpassed. The marvel of Thanatopsis is the greater, because, although a singularly mature and precocious boy, there is no sign in Bryant's earlier verses, flowing and correct as they are, of original power. In Raphael's early pictures there is evidently the overmastering influence of Perugino, but there is also a finer and humaner touch. In Beethoven's first music there is often the rhythmical reminiscence of Mozart, but there are also signs of the power and grandeur which we know by the master's name. But in the earlier verses of Bryant, as in Byron's *Hours of Idleness*, there is no pre-sage of his genius, no prelude of his fame.

Bryant says that *Thanatopsis* was written soon after leaving college. He was not sure whether it was in his eighteenth or nineteenth year, but it was before he began the study of the law in 1813. For some reason he did not send it to the "*Hampshire Gazette*," nor

seek a publication in any form. But once, upon leaving home, he placed the MS. of *Thanatopsis*, with that of other verses, in a drawer in his father's office. It must have lain there for some months when Dr. Bryant, then a member of the Legislature, finding the poems in his drawer, sent them, anonymously, and without his son's knowledge, to the "North American Review," which had then been published for two years, and was at once a review and a magazine. Mr. Dana, who was one of the editors, immediately recognized the worth of the poem, and said truly, what no man was more qualified than he to declare, that it could not have been written in this country, for he knew no American who could write it. He was told that the author was a member of the Legislature, and he hastened to the Senate Chamber, where Dr. Bryant was pointed out to him. "'Tis a good head," he said, "but I do not see *Thanatopsis* there." The poem was published in the September number of the Review in 1817, and it is preceded by a separate poem of four stanzas, which was attached to it by mistake.

Their tone is that of the same melancholy fascination with death, but they are in a wholly different key. *Thanatopsis* itself, as originally printed, contained but forty-nine of the eighty-one lines that we know, and it was accompanied by three of the MSS. which the Doctor had found in his office drawer: the Inscription for the Entrance to a Wood, and two translations from Horace.

This is all that we know of the production of this poem. I linger upon it, because it was the first adequate poetic voice of the solemn New England spirit; and in the grandeur of the hills, in the heroic Puritan tradition of sacrifice and endurance, in the daily life, saddened by imperious and awful theologic dogma, in the hard circumstance of the pioneer household, the contest with the wilderness, the grim legends of Indians and the war, have we not some outward clue to the strain of *Thanatopsis*, the depthless and entrancing sadness, as of inexorable fate, that murmurs, like the autumn wind through the forest, in the melancholy cadences of this hymn to Death?

 Moreover it was without a harbinger

in our literature, and without a trace of the English masters of the hour. The contrast in literary splendor, of Europe and America at the beginning of the century, seemed to many a sensitive American as hopeless as it was conspicuous. The great German epoch of Goethe and Schiller was at its highest glory, and in England, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Southey, Shelley, Keats, Campbell, Moore, and Byron were in full song when *Thanatopsis* was published. The contrast was, indeed, hard. In vain the patriotic President Dwight had said that Trumbull's *MacFingal* was as good as *Hudibras*, for who would speak for President Dwight, and what courage was equal to saying that his *Conquest of Canaan* was as good as Milton's *Paradise Lost*? Yet Trumbull and Dwight, Barlow and Freneau, were our chief names in poetry, and Barlow's burlesque, *Hasty Pudding*, was the best characteristic American poem when *Thanatopsis* appeared. "Shall we match Joel Barlow," exclaimed Fisher Ames a little earlier, "against Homer and Hesiod? Can Thomas Paine contend against Plato, or could Find-

lay's history of his own (whisky) insurrection vie with Sallust's narrative of Catiline's?" We are apt to say that the conditions of colonial settlement are not favorable to literary and artistic development. But it is easy to overestimate the value of mere circumstance, and it is always the genius, not the circumstance, that controls. Canova used to say, that if Pitt and Fox had lived in Italy they would have been artists; but we must not therefore conclude that Eli Whitney was Dante under new conditions, and that if David Crockett had been born in Augustan Rome, he would probably have come down to us as the poet Virgil. Great histories will hardly be written upon the frontier of a new country: but Robert Burns, in a hovel, sang songs as pure as the dew-drop and sweet as the morning. It is precisely the intellectual force and independence, the nameless and mysterious genius shown in Thanatopsis, a poem so purely original and unexpected, that Dana at once said that it could not have been written by an American, which is the pioneer of national literature, and which placed the

poem at once and forever in the literature of the world.

When *Thanatopsis* was published, Bryant was already a practicing lawyer. He had begun his studies with Judge Samuel Howe, of Worthington, near Cummington, who, when he found a volume of Wordsworth in his student's hands, warned him that such reading would spoil his style, and he was admitted to the bar at Plymouth in 1815. He opened an office for a year in Plainfield, where he had fitted for college; but few clients came, and in 1816, in the month of October, he says, when the woods were in all the glory of autumn, he turned his back upon the Hampshire hills for the adjoining county of Berkshire, and settled in Great Barrington. In Berkshire he passed nine years, and there some of his most familiar verses were written. A companion of those days, the venerable Ralph Taylor, who lived in the same house with him, remembers that he was fond of roaming over the hills, and in his walks was very genial and sociable. He had gay comrades, too, village revelers; but Bryant, then as always, quietly held his

own temperate way, unseduced by fatal good-fellowship. He was an active, learned, and, as I have heard, even a fiery young lawyer, and his name appears four or five times in the reports of the Supreme Court. He was also a true son of the land of the town-meeting, and he did not evade his duty as a citizen. On the 1st day of January, 1818, he delivered an address before the Great Barrington Bible Society, and in 1820 he was elected clerk of the town, and remained in office until he removed to New York. As a Justice of the Peace his first act was the marriage of a gentleman still living, and as town-clerk, in January, 1821, he recorded in the town book his own marriage—that marriage to which the sacred and hidden allusions in his verse are exquisitely touching and tender, and which was the most gracious and beautiful influence of his life. For the forty-five years that they lived together his wife was his only really intimate friend, and when she died he had no other. He was young, his fame was growing, and with domestic duties, with literary studies and work, and professional and public activi-

ties, his tranquil days passed in the happy valley of the Housatonic.

It is plain, however, that Bryant's taste, his temperament, his natural powers, were averse to the law. The literary instinct was always stirring in his heart, and there are constant and delightful traces of his literary industry at this time. In March, 1818, he published in the "North American Review" a fragment of Simonides, the Lines to a Water-fowl, and a poem to a friend upon his marriage, in which the poet gayly declares what he daily disproved :

"And I that loved to trace the woods before,  
And climb the hill, a playmate to the breeze,  
Have vowed to tune the rural lay no more,  
Have bid my useless classics sleep at ease,  
And left the race of bards to scribble, starve and  
freeze."

If he thought himself willing to leave the muse, she was not ready to desert him. In the next July he contributed to the "Review" an interesting paper upon American poetry, in which he finds little to praise, but thinks that it was better than could have



been expected in a young nation just beginning to attend to intellectual refinement, and he concludes felicitously, but discouragingly, that the only poets we had could hardly be more admired "without danger to the taste of the nation." A year later, in June, 1819, he published a short essay in the "North American Review," on "The Happy Temperament," which is singularly interesting as the work of a poet whose strain is sometimes called remote from human sympathy, and a man who was so often thought to be cold and austere. It is not, says the author of *Thanatopsis*, the shallow, unsympathetic disposition which laughs all ills away that is to be called happy, because the "melancholy feelings, when called up by their proper and natural causes, and confined to their proper limits, are the parents of almost all our virtues." "The temperament of an unbroken cheerfulness," says our poet, "is the temperament of insensibility." A paper in the September number of the same year, on *Trisyllabic Feet*, in Iambic verse, shows his constant and careful study of the literary art,

as well as of literature. In the summer of 1821, the author whose genius had been first recognized by the literary tribunal of Cambridge, read before the Phi Beta Kappa Society, at Harvard College, his longest poem, "The Ages." It is a simple, serious, and thoughtful survey of history, tracing a general law of progress; and the stately Spenserian measure is marked by the moderation, the sinewy simplicity, the maturity and freedom from mannerism, which are Bryant's sign-manual. The last stanza of this poem breathes in majestic music that pure passion for America, and that strong and sublime faith in her destiny, which constantly appears in his verse and never wavered in his heart. It was the era of the Holy Alliance in Europe, the culmination of the reaction against the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars, when popular liberty was in mortal peril; and, after a glance at struggling Europe, the poet exclaims:

"But thou, my country! thou shalt never fall,  
But with thy children—thy maternal care,  
Thy lavish love, thy blessings showered on all—  
These are thy fetters—seas and stormy air,

Are the wide barrier of thy borders, where,  
Among thy gallant sons that guard thee well,  
Thou laugh'st at enemies! who shall then declare  
The date of thy deep-founded strength, or tell  
How happy in thy lap the sons of men shall dwell?"

He was already acknowledged to be the first of our poets, and he himself dates the dawn of our literature in the year 1821, the year of his marriage and of his Harvard poem. It was in that year that Cooper's *Spy* was published and Irving's *Sketch-Book* was completed, and Bryant's own first slight volume was issued; Dana's *Idle Man* was just finished, and Miss Sedgwick had already published *Hope Leslie*. Two years before, Percival's first volume had appeared, which Edward Everett had saluted as a harbinger of great achievements; and Halleck's and Drake's *Croakers* were already popular. Bryant's ambition, his hopes, his conscious power, secretly solicited him and weaned him more and more from the law. The rigor of his Federalism also was relaxing. During the earlier days of his life, in Berkshire, his name appears officially signed to notices and re-

ports of Federal meetings and caucuses, but he was not known to make political speeches, nor to be an active politician. All signs, even of such political interest, however, disappear toward the end of his residence in Great Barrington, although he undoubtedly voted, in 1824, for John Quincy Adams, as there was but one vote cast against him in the town.

For some time Bryant had counted among his most faithful friends the Sedgwicks of Stockbridge, one of the most noted of the Berkshire families. In 1820, Miss Sedgwick wrote from Stockbridge that she had sent for Bryant, and he had called upon her as he came from court. She found him of a charming countenance; very modest, but not bashful, and he very readily promised to write some hymns for her friend, Mr. Sewall. Two years later she writes from New York that Bryant had been in town, and that she had never seen him so happy nor half so agreeable. She describes him as very much animated with his prospects, meaning evidently his literary prospects, and full of good sense, good judgment, and moderation. Miss Sedg-

wick's brother, Henry, was Bryant's especial friend, and Mr. Sedgwick's hereditary Federalism was overborne by his profound interest in the question of free trade. He wrote articles, pamphlets, and essays against Mr. Clay's American and tariff system, and his arguments found a prompt and ready response in Bryant's instinctive love of liberty. Perhaps, as his friend eloquently talked, the young poet recalled the lines of Pope in "Windsor Forest," lines that he must often have read with his father, and often afterward in fancy applied to the noble bay and harbor of this great city:

"The time shall come, when, free as seas or wind,  
Unbounded Thames shall flow for all mankind ;  
Whole nations enter with each swelling tide,  
And seas but join the regions they divide ;  
Earth's distant ends our glory shall behold,  
And the New World launch forth to seek the Old."

Mr. Sedgwick, wishing to see Bryant in a larger sphere, urged him constantly to remove to New York, and Bryant's heart took sides with his friend. He came to see the city, and a very little event soon broke the

slight thread that held him to the law. The tradition of the local bar is, that in 1824 Bryant had obtained for a client a verdict for slander; but judgment was arrested upon appeal, because of a technical omission in Bryant's declaration, although Chief-Justice Parsons virtually admitted the justice of the claim. There is a further tradition, that a difference with one of the opposing counsel, about the cost of the suit, was one of the occasions in which the restrained fire of the poet's temperament blazed fiercely forth. It was easy for a man whose wishes sought an excuse for leaving the law, to find it in what seemed to him a denial of acknowledged justice by the highest legal tribunal. To his indignant mind, the law probably seemed, despite Coke's famous words, the perfection of unreason, and the poet, bent upon closing his office, and loving his Wordsworth more than his Blackstone, may well have felt that if the seat of law be the bosom of God, it had returned whence it came. Bryant had tried his last case. He left Berkshire, but while its Monument Mountain stands and its Green

River flows, Berkshire will claim their poet as her own. One of the last of the Berkshire poems was the June, which was first published in the year after he left Great Barrington, the poet's farewell to

"The glorious sky,  
And the green uplands round:"

the farewell whose pensive and airy music was in all hearts and on all lips when he died, as he had fancifully wished, in June.

The New York to which Bryant came to live by literature was a city of a hundred and eighty thousand inhabitants, the pleasant city of which Paulding says, in his *New Pilgrim's Progress*, that the dandy under no temptation must extend his walk beyond the north-west corner of Chambers Street. The solid city reached a little beyond Canal Street, and a line of houses straggled up as far as Fourth Street. There were those who still remembered the pebbly shore of the Hudson River just above Barclay Street, which was the favorite walk of Jonathan Edwards, when he was preaching for a time in the church in

Wall Street, and Bryant speaks of his own delight in rambling along the wooded shores of the Hudson above Canal Street. The house of his friend Sedgwick, whose sister Catharine was already famous, was the resort of the Knickerbocker wits and authors, and of all literary strangers. To this modest Holland House came Verplanck, Halleck, Hillhouse, Cooper, Moore, Chancellor Kent, Dunlap, Jarvis, De Kay, Jacob Harvey, Durand, Henry James Anderson, and from this charmed circle Cooper afterward founded a club, which met weekly in Washington Hall. The year of Bryant's arrival in New York was that of the beginning of the Sketch Club and the founding of the National Academy of Design. To this Academy he was always loyal, and he writes proudly from London, in 1845, of the exhibition of the Royal Academy: "I see nothing in it to astonish one who has visited the exhibition of our Academy of the Arts of Design in New York."

His work began at once, but the "New York Review," which he edited, and other literary enterprises, soon failed; and in the



year 1826, when he was thirty-two years old, he became associate editor, with William Coleman, of the "Evening Post." It was the memorable year of the first Jubilee of our Independence. Peace and prosperity seemed to be assured, and the mighty flood of American civilization, with a people grown in fifty years from three millions to ten, was sweeping from the sea-coast over the Alleghanies, and far westward beyond the Mississippi, leaving in every valley and on every hill-top, as it passed, the bold enterprise, the ready invention, the nimble skill, the cheerful and heroic endurance, the religious sobriety, all the robust qualities that found and perpetuate great States. Lafayette had just crossed the ocean to see with rejoicing eyes the glory of the nation whose generous soldier he had been. De Witt Clinton had just led in triumph the waters of Lake Erie to the sea; and in the year in which Bryant began his editorial life, John Adams and Jefferson had died, happy in the undoubted security of their work, and Webster, summoned to speak the reverent gratitude of a nation,

had delivered the oration in Faneuil Hall, which instantly passed into the class-book and speakers, and was declaimed in every schoolhouse in the land. The country had not lost its original character of a rural republic. Political feeling, as we have seen, was intense, but the vast political hierarchy which has sprung from patronage, and which now, with far-reaching and elaborate organization, constitutes a distinct and disciplined class of middle-men for the control of politics, was practically unknown, and the movements of parties, therefore, more truly represented the convictions of the people. John Quincy Adams was President, a man of unsullied character, of great ability, of resolute independence, superior to party trick or personal intrigue; a civilian of will as indomitable as that of his military successor—a President—and such may our Presidents always be!—who believed that he serves his party best who serves his country most.

This was the fortunate epoch and this the happy country of 1826. It was also the end and the beginning of party organizations.

Mr. Adams favored what was called a magnificent national policy, a system of international improvements, of superb public works, a continental alliance with South America, a protective tariff. Bryant was more interested in the freedom of trade than in any other pending public question, and the general argument for freedom of trade was an argument for the limited function of the national government. Bryant's subsequent editorial associate, Mr. Bigelow, tells us that upon undertaking the joint editorship of the Post, a paper which had been founded under the auspices of Hamilton, the father of protection and of the United States Bank, the only condition that the young poet from the hills made was an unfettered freedom to advocate the emancipation of commerce from severe restrictions, and the separation of the money of the Government from the banking capital of the country.

It was at this time, in the years 1823 and the two following years, that England, under Huskisson, abandoned the old system of protection and made the changes in commercial

legislation which are regarded as the first practical application of the principles of free trade. The contest in this country began at once upon the revision of the tariff of 1824, and the passage of that of 1828, from which sprang nullification. It was a great debate, in which sectional feeling was fiercely inflamed, and in which also Webster and Calhoun changed ground. It was the first important public discussion in which Bryant engaged, and he was soon involved in it with all the fire of conviction and all the energy of his nature. The Post was the sole advocate, in the Free States, of the policy and the justice of the principles of Free Trade. With resolute pertinacity, through good and evil report, Bryant maintained that the condition of higher civilization, the surest pledge of international peace and justice, and the security of American prosperity was freedom of commercial exchange. He fought this battle for more than fifty years ; the last article that he wrote for his paper was a discussion of the balance of trade, and he died in the faith, acknowledged as one of its most powerful champions.

Meanwhile General Jackson had declared for a "judicious" tariff. The Post supported him for the Presidency; and in 1829, the year of Jackson's inauguration, Mr. Coleman died, and Bryant became chief editor. But his devotion to freedom of exchange was like that which he cherished for all other freedom. It was American liberty, not what the English laureate, speaking of revolutionary France, calls "The blind hysterics of the Celt." It was the freedom of the citizen in the State, and the freedom of the State in the Union. It was liberty under law, that he sought, for he knew that lawless revolution is a remedy more appalling than the evils it would cure. He had pointed out, in principle and in detail, the injustice of the tariff toward the Southern States, but when nullification was proposed as a remedy, his voice was prompt, clear and decisive in sustaining General Jackson's proclamation—true to national union in 1832 as he was in 1861.

But from the day that Bryant began to edit the Post, there was but one question which was really supreme, the question which

hung like a huge storm-cloud in the summer sky, its lightning sheathed, its thunder silent, but gathering with every moment angrier force and more appalling fury—the question with whose final and tremendous settlement the land still heaves. It had apparently disappeared in the deceitful calm that followed the Missouri struggle, but the first penetrating and significant note of a tempest not to be stayed was heard within four years of Bryant's removal to New York, in the moral anti-slavery appeal of Lundy and Garrison. Bryant seemed to the ardent leaders of that great agitation as the multitude of editors and politicians seemed to them, indifferent and hesitating, too cold and reluctant for their own generous wrath and zeal. In his letters from the Southern States and the West Indies, as late as 1849, there is a photographic fidelity of detail in descriptions of slavery and of the slaves, but they are the pictures of a seemingly passionless observer. There is no apparent sense of wrong, no flaming indignation, no denunciation; an occasional impulsive expression only shows his feelings.

This restraint and moderation, however, always so characteristic, are most impressive, and give to his prose, whether in letters or addresses or editorial articles, however strong the public feeling or hot the debate, the weight and value which so often exhale in greater fervor of expression. But the breath of the tropics did not relax his moral fibre. The loiterer at the Negro corn-shucking in Carolina and in the orange groves of Florida, the tranquil stranger in the Cuban coffee estates and the sugar plantations of Matanzas, who observed everything and quietly asked a traveler's questions, was not untrue to the spirit that he had inhaled with his native breath among the northern hills.

Through all the great Slavery contest from 1820 to 1861, which included the prime of his manhood, Bryant's course was determined by his own love of liberty and justice, by his temperament and conscience. He repelled the reproaches of friends equally with the gibes of enemies. When the moral appeal swelled to an agitation under which the coun-

try rocked; when there were even voices heard in Faneuil Hall justifying the assassination of Lovejoy, and American freemen speaking for liberty in New York were silenced by mobs, and with no consuming wrath of protest from the respectable public opinion of the city—although Bryant, as I think, deprecated the agitation as mistaken in its method, and necessarily futile and disastrous in its result, he resolutely defended the fundamental right of discussion, which was the practical and essential anti-slavery demand.

Early in 1837, when the House of Representatives tried to stifle the anti-slavery petitions presented by John Quincy Adams—and they might as well have tried to blow out the sun—Bryant denounced the folly and the wrong of attempting to “muzzle discussion in this country,” and in the same year, when the colored voters of New York asked the legislature to grant them suffrage upon the same conditions with the white voters—Bryant sustained their prayer as just, and disdained any deference to external dictation whether from the South, from the North, or from any other



quarter. With the same clear perception and inflexible principle he held that Congress had perfect power over the question of slavery in the District of Columbia; and he sternly condemned all interference with the right of any body of citizens anywhere in the country to declare their views upon the subject by petition to their representatives. To-day, in the full sunlight of constitutional personal liberty, these angry debates seem like the strange spectres of a cloudy night. Their echoes are remote and unreal, like those of Attila's battle in the air. But in telling the story of the life of a reverend citizen who saw the beginning and the end of that tremendous contest, the struggle in which the institutions and the principles that we all love and trust were tried by blood and fire, emerging at last to victory, but emerging only through

“——exultations, agonies,  
And love, and man's unconquerable mind,”

victory not for one side, but for all men; not for provincial sections, but for national union; not for the North nor for the South, but for

America and universal liberty; in telling the story of such a life, the men and the contests of old days spring again to light, we see how continuous is the stream of history, and we learn once more that the welfare of liberty and civilization is intrusted to precisely those qualities which Bryant displayed in his editorial career.

His temperament was conservative in the truest sense, but his political convictions and sympathies were in the same sense liberal and Democratic. The old Federal distrust of the people, which in later days and under other conditions has seemed to so many honest and patriotic men to be justified as only a proper fear of ignorance and corruption, yet a distrust which, however logical it may seem in argument and detail, is refuted by the marvelous and beneficent American history of a century, was a doubt which Bryant never shared. As Sir Philip Sidney warned the young poet to look in his own heart and write, so his good genius taught Bryant to look into his own heart and believe. He knew himself, and he therefore trusted others.

He had seen among the hills the virtues, the habits, the character, that make popular government simple and practicable, and he did not doubt that under the unparalleled circumstances of the country, however political conditions might be complicated by the large infusion of other blood and other traditions, the great appeal which our institutions make to the conscious dignity and self-respect of human nature would be answered in ways we might not be able to foresee, but which experience and self-knowledge admonish us will be effective.

But, from the first to the last, his Democracy never meant a rabble nor a mob, but a constitutionally self-restrained people. Bryant, indeed, was a warm party man. It was a fiery nature which always lay beneath the placid and coldly reserved manner, and which at times flashed suddenly into vehement expression. The verse of no poet is more absolutely sincere, and the lines in the tender poem to his wife, on the future life, written in 1837, which have often seemed singularly extravagant for a man so apparently passion-

less, were unquestionably the fervid expression of self-knowledge :

“And wrath has left its scar—that fire of hell  
Has left its frightful scar upon my soul.”

With what force he restrained himself we shall not know. We only know with what success. But his habitual moderation and calmness were not the gift of an easy, lymphatic temperament; they were the grace of a great and manly self-command. In the vast political strife of the half-century, he was a foremost combatant. But his politics had no personal aims. During his life he held but two public offices—those of town-clerk and justice of the peace in Great Barrington. He was a presidential elector in 1860, a mere honorary position, and he declined even an election as Regent of the University, from his invincible dislike of any kind of public life. There is, indeed, no nobler ambition than to fill a great office greatly, but it was not in Bryant's heart. The splendid prizes of official place never allured him, and his lofty aims shone as pure in his perfect independence as

the virginal beauty of Sabrina in the "glassy, cool, translucent wave."

In all the long, tumultuous years of his editorial life does any memory, however searching or censorious, recall one line that he wrote which was not honest and pure, one measure that he defended except from the profoundest conviction of its usefulness to the country, one cause that he advocated which any friend of liberty, of humanity, of good government would deplore? When in the British Parliament, after a hard and weary and doubtful struggle of twenty years, the bill of William Wilberforce for abolishing the British slave trade was finally passed, the historian says that Sir Samuel Romilly surprised the staid House of Commons into loud and long acclamations by comparing the greatness and happiness of Napoleon Bonaparte, then in the zenith of his imperial glory, with those of him who would this "day lay his head upon his pillow and remember that the slave trade was no more." So it is the lesson of this editorial life, that public service, the most resplendent and the most justly renowned, on

sea or shore, in cabinet or Congress, however great, however beneficent, is not a truer service than that of the private citizen like Bryant, who for half a century, with conscience and knowledge, with power and unquailing courage, did his part in holding the hand and heart of his country true to her now glorious ideal.

During all this time, the sturdy political editor was the chief literary figure in the city. Mr. Bigelow says, that he never mingled or confounded his two vocations, that they were two distinct currents of intellectual life. This is doubtless true. But it is the same breath of the organ that thunders through the trumpet stop and whispers in the *vox humana*. In the earlier legends, it is the poet who leads the warriors, and the earlier legends were justified when the poet of Thanatopsis and "The Water-fowl" came down from the hills to the newspaper office. In 1832, he was, as he says, "wandering in Illinois hovering on the skirts of the Indian war," when Washington Irving returned from his long European absence. In the same year a complete edi-

tion of his poems was published in New York, and he went to Europe in 1834 for the first time, returning in 1836. In 1841, and the following year, he travelled in the West and South of the United States. In 1842, "The Fountain" and other poems of seventeen years were published, and in 1844 "The White-footed Deer." He went again to Europe in 1845, seeing England for the first time. The next year a fully illustrated collection of his poems was issued, and in 1848 he read a discourse upon Cole before the National Academy of Design. In the summer of 1849 he went for the third time to Europe, and upon his return, in 1850, he published his "Letters of a Traveller." Early in 1852, he delivered a discourse on Cooper. In the spring he was in Cuba, and during the summer again in Europe. But amid all accumulating interests and duties and renown, his unwearied editorial industry continued; an industry of which his associate says, that for five days out of every week, during forty-two years of the fifty-two that he was the chief editor, he was at his desk before eight

o'clock in the morning, and left upon his journal in some form the daily impression of his character and genius.

During all this time, also, the literature that he had heralded he had seen arising around him; and he greeted with cordial appreciation poets, historians, story-tellers, essayists, whose names we love and who have made our name honorable. Yet, as his own poems were published from time to time, it was plain that through all the imposing changes of form in English literature his simple and severe genius remained unchanged. Although he was a singularly accomplished student of the literature of many languages, and while his translations from other tongues are so felicitous that his fellow master, Longfellow, praised some of his Spanish translations, nearly fifty years ago, as rivalling the original in beauty, yet his own verse is as free from merely literary influence or reminiscence as the pure air of his native hills from the perfume of exotics.

Undoubtedly the grandeur and solemnity of Wordsworth, as he told Dana, had stirred



his soul with sympathy. But not the false simplicity that sometimes betrays Wordsworth, nor the lurid melodrama of Byron, nor the aërial fervor of Shelley, nor the luxuriant beauty of Keats, in whose line the Greek marble is sometimes suffused with a splendor as of Venetian color, nor, in his later years, the felicity and richness of Tennyson, who has revealed the flexibility and picturesqueness and modulated music of the English language in lines which a line of Keats describes :

“ Like lucent sirops tinct with cinnamon,”

—not all these varying and entrancing strains which captivated the public of the hour, touched in the least the verse of Bryant. His last considerable poem, “The Flood of Years,” but echoes in its meditative flow the solemn cadences of *Thanatopsis*. The child was father of the man. The genius of Bryant, not profuse and imperial, neither intense with dramatic passion nor throbbing with lyrical fervor, but calm, meditative, pure, has its true symbol among his native hills, a mountain-spring untainted by mineral or slime of

earth or reptile venom, cool, limpid and serene. His verse is the virile expression of the healthy communion of a strong, sound man with the familiar aspects of nature, and its broad, clear, open-air quality has a certain Homeric suggestiveness. It is not the poetry of an eager enthusiasm; it is not fascinating and overpowering to the sensibility of youth. The first considerable collection of 1832 was not snatched from the booksellers' hands, and four years had passed before it had reached a fourth edition. Bryant founded no school and he belonged to none, except it be to the class of those who are vaguely called poets of nature. His spirit is doubtless more akin to that of Wordsworth than to any other of the "bards sublime," although he had not Wordsworth's fertility and variety and richness of imagination, and resembled him only in the meditative character of his genius. It is this essentially meditative character which makes the atmosphere of his poetic world more striking than its forms; and thus his contribution of memorable lines to our literature is not great, although there are

some lines of an unsurpassed majesty, and again touches of fancy and imagination as airy and delicate as the dance of fairies upon a moonlit lawn. One stanza, indeed, perhaps the most familiar in all his verse, will be long the climax of patriotic appeal; and for a thousand years in the country that he loved, while the absorbing contentions of politics shall continue, and there shall be an ever higher political aspiration and a nobler political endeavor, Bryant's lines will be the gathering cry and battle song of brave soldiers of humanity yet unborn:

“ Truth crushed to earth shall rise again ;  
The eternal years of God are hers :  
But Error, wounded, writhes with pain  
And dies among her worshippers.”

Meanwhile, true to his principles, his party associations were again changing, and the close of the administration of Mr. Pierce found Bryant in the opposition. He saw in the situation of the country but one supreme issue. He saw the system of slavery entrenched in vast interests, traditions, and prejudices, in the spirit of party, in the

timidity of trade, in constitutional interpretation, in the idolatry of the Union, and in a vague and universal apprehension of the illimitable evil of resistance. He saw its vast power. He acknowledged every lawful defense, every plea of expediency, every appeal of possible calamity. He had deprecated agitation which seemed to him only to exasperate feeling and rivet bonds more closely. But now he saw—not as a Democrat, not as a New Yorker, not as a Northerner—he saw as a man, that humanity was in danger, where he could help; he saw as an American, that America was imperilled; he saw as a life-long lover of liberty, that liberty was vitally assailed; and as a man, as an American, as a lover of liberty, he declared, in the spring of 1856, against the extension of slavery, and five years later his whole political faith burst forth in one indignant peal of patriotism:

“Our country calls—away, away!

To where the blood-stream blots the green;

Strike to defend the gentlest sway

That time in all his course has seen.

Strike for that broad and goodly land,  
Blow after blow, till men shall see  
That might and right move hand in hand,  
And glorious must their triumph be."

But he renounced none of his political principles, and when the tendency to a more consolidated and powerful central authority was naturally developed by the war, according to the faith of his life, he counseled the statesmanship of the Sun, not of the Wind, and held that loyalty alienated from the Union could be most surely restored and equal rights most firmly secured only by large dependence upon local law and local feeling, by long patience and slow processes of healing. It was the same man, the same patriot, the same American, asserting the same principles, who, in 1832, praised Jackson's proclamation against nullification, and, in 1837, spurned all external interference respecting the qualification of voters in New York; who, in 1863, sustained the Emancipation Proclamation, and, in 1875, denounced the interference of the national military power with the Legislature of Louisiana. But as

he passed through parties, so he passed out of them. With increasing years his party zeal diminished, and under the liberalizing and mellowing influence of time he gradually became, as was said of Sir Robert Peel, "himself a party." He had been a Federalist, a Democrat, and a Republican; but all were only names of the various uniforms in which he served the same cause, the cause of his youth and of his age, the cause of America and of human nature.

Bryant made his fifth voyage to Europe in 1857, travelling in Spain and Algiers, and he published a volume of Letters from Spain upon his return. He went again in 1865 and 1867, seven times in all. It was during his absence, in 1858, that he was baptized in Naples. He had been religiously bred in New England Congregationalism, but when he came to New York he went to the little Unitarian church in Chambers Street, near Broadway; of which William Ware, the mild and apostolic author of the Letters from Palmyra, was pastor. He went afterwards to the Second Church, of which Dr. Dewey and Dr.

Osgood were subsequently ministers, and he stayed in that parish until 1863, when he found the church of his old parish, now All Souls' Church, of which the Reverend Dr. Bellows was pastor, more accessible. In that parish he remained, and from that church he was buried. But while his religious, like his political convictions, were positive, sectarian, like political bonds, did not hold him closely. The spirit of liberty, which was the native air of his soul, fostered the celestial graces of faith, hope, charity, and he was, as his poetry and his life testify, essentially a religious man. The poem called "The Life that is," dated at Castellamare, in May, 1858, commemorates the recovery of his wife from a serious illness. A little time before, in the month of April, after a long walk with his friend, the Reverend Mr. Waterston, of Boston, on the shore of the Bay of Naples, he spoke with softened heart of the new beauty that he felt in the old truth, and proposed to his friend to baptize him. With prayer and hymn and spiritual meditation, a little company of seven, says Mr. Waterston, in a large upper room, as in

the Christian story, partook of the communion, and, with his good gray head bowed down, Bryant was baptized.

During all these busy years he had become a man of threescore and ten. The pleasant city that he knew when he came to New York was now the chief city of the Western Continent, one of the great cities of the world; and the poet whose immortal distinction it was to have written the first memorable American poem, and whose fame was part of the national glory—the editor who, with perfect unselfishness and unswerving fidelity, had expounded and defended great fundamental principles of national progress and prosperity, became our Patriarch, our Mentor, our most conspicuous citizen. Every movement of art and literature, of benevolence and good citizenship, sought the decoration of his name. His presence was the grace of every festival, and although he had always instinctively shrunk from personal publicity, he yielded to a fate, benignant for the community, and to his other distinctions added that of the occasional orator. Yet all such associations were



not only gilded with the luster of his renown ; they had not only the advantage of his ample knowledge and various observations, but there was the stimulus of his temperament and character. His companions in society and at the club know that his great literary accomplishment was absolutely without pedantry, while it gave his conversation and writing the charm of apt allusion and most felicitous quotation ; but they know also how much greater was the man than the scholar, and that his character was as fine as his genius.

We saw in his life the simple dignity which we associate with the old republics. So Lycurgus may have ruled in Sparta, so Cato may have walked in Rome—an uncrowned regality in that venerable head, as of one nurtured in Republican air, upon Republican traditions. But here and now, at this season, when our hearts recur to that Pilgrim Landing from which so much of America sprang, we may gratefully remember that this son of New England was always, in the most generous and representative sense, an American. He loitered with the sympathy of a poet,

with the fondness of a scholar, with the interest of a political thinker, in other and historic lands. He saw the Rhine and the Danube, Italy, Germany, England and Spain, Palestine and the West Indies. He was welcomed and flattered by famous men and beautiful women ; but grave and simple, pleased but untouched, he passed through the maze of blandishment as a cool north wind blows through a garden of spices. Whoever saw Bryant saw America. Whoever talked with him felt the characteristic tone of American life. Whoever knew him comprehended the reason and perceived the quality of American greatness. Many Americans have been as warmly welcomed in other lands, many have acknowledged a generous hospitality with as gracious courtesy, but no one ever more fully and truly carried with him the perfectly appreciative but undazzled America ; America tranquil, content and expectant, the untitled cousin of the older world, born to as great a heritage and satisfied with her own. You will bear me witness, for you knew him, that in the same way here at home he American-

ized every occasion, every enterprise in which he took part. I have seen him at some offering of homage to a foreign guest, skillfully withstanding the current of excessive compliment, natural at such times, yet without morose dissent, and only by a shrewd and playful humor, and with most friendly regard for the rites of hospitality, gently reminding us that manly and self-respecting courtesy never bows too low.

From his childhood and through all his eighty-four years his habits of life were temperate and careful. The spring in a sheltered upland nook at Cummington is still shown, in which the infant boy was bathed, and the care which was there prefigured was the amulet that charmed his life. A plain, sweet method of living was natural to him, and the same moderation, which was the law of his mental and moral being, asserted itself in every bodily habit. He rose early, took active exercise, walked far and easily, spared work at night, yet had time for every duty of a fully occupied life, and at seventy-one sat down in the shadow of the great sorrow of his life to

seek a wise distraction in translating the Iliad and the Odyssey. His sobriety was effortless; it was that of a sound man, not of an ascetic. He was not a vegetarian nor a total abstainer from wine; but of tobacco, he said, playfully, that he did not meddle with it except to quarrel with its use. No man ever bore the burden of years more lightly, and men of younger generations saw with admiration and amazement an agility that shamed their own. At fourscore his eyes were undimmed, and his ears had a boy's acuteness. Temperance, regularity, supreme good sense were his only rules of living, and these brought him to that hale and gracious age in which he could have applied to himself most fittingly the lofty lines of Emerson:

“As the bird trims her to the gale,  
I trim myself to the storm of time,  
I man the rudder, reef the sail,  
Obey the voice at eve, obeyed at prime:  
‘Lowly faithful, banish fear,  
Right onward drive unharmed,  
The port well worth the cruise is near,  
And every wave is charmed!’”

It is more than time that my voice were stilled, but I linger and linger, for when these words are spoken, the last formal commemoration of our poet will have ended, and we shall leave him to history and good fame. The whole earth, said Pericles, is the tomb of illustrious men. But how especially the characteristic aspects of American nature become to the imagination and memory memorials of Bryant. The primeval woods, "God's first temples," breathe the solemn benediction of his verse. The rosy splendor of orchards in the bright June sunshine recall the singer of the planting of the apple tree—the kindly eye, the manly heart,

"Whose part in all the pomp that fills  
The circuit of the summer hills,  
Is that his grave is green."

The water-fowl at evening high in the depths of heaven, "lone wandering, but not lost," figures his lofty, pure, and solitary strain :

"And poured round all  
Old ocean's gray and melancholy waste,"

murmurs his name forever along the shores we love.

Here, then, we leave him, with tender reverence for the father of our song, with grateful homage to the spotless and faithful citizen, with affectionate admiration for the simple and upright man. Here we leave him, and we—we go forward refreshed, strengthened, inspired, by the light of the life which, like a star serene and inextinguishable,

“Flames in the forehead of our morning sky.”









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